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## Kansas Takes Pride in Roadside Prairies

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NATURAL SNOW FENCE  
*Ron Klataske*

## KANSAS TAKES PRIDE IN ROADSIDE PRAIRIES

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Efforts to adopt the principles of IRVM in Kansas have been growing since 2000 when the executive board of Audubon of Kansas (AOK) met with the Assistant Secretary of Transportation and KDOT staff to discuss the implementation of IRVM. At that time AOK formed a partnership with KDOT to promote and maintain prairie plant communities on the state highways rights-of-way (ROW) for purposes of reducing maintenance costs, enhancing bird and native pollinator habitat, serving as “living snow fences,” improving water quality while reducing runoff and soil erosion, and highlighting the beauty and diversity of native prairie.

In 2001, a citizen workshop was held, in which ten pilot project sites were selected in four districts to be used as a testing model for IRVM in Kansas. Citizens and KDOT representatives were selected for each project site, with a steering committee that helped develop and implement multi-year IRVM action plans with

specific recommendations and goals. A training program was initiated for KDOT personnel to become acquainted with IRVM and to learn to identify native plants. Unfortunately, IRVM and the recommended expansion of limited mowing was not fully implemented.

In 2008, KDOT Secretary Deb Miller responded favorably to AOK’s continued advocacy and formed a special “Aesthetics Task Force” to pursue ways to develop more ecological and economical ways to manage the 150,000 acres of vegetated “public land” along 10,000 miles of state highways. The Kansas Native Plant Society, Kansas Wildlife Federation, Monarch Watch, and Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks joined the work of the task force. What emerged was a set of roadside management policies designed to reduce unnecessary mowing and to shift to using seed mixtures of only native grasses and forbs when planting rural roadsides. Full implementation will save millions of dollars annually and reduce consumption of fossil fuels used for mowing operations. In addition, the beauty of native grasses and wildflowers provides everyone with a pleasant view of our natural heritage as a “prairie state.”

“Together we’ve developed a wiser approach to roadside management, we’ve found a way to stretch KDOT’s maintenance budget and we now have guidelines that will enhance the natural beauty of our state,” says KDOT District One Engineer Clay Adams, who leads the task force. Implementation of reduced mowing practices along the Kansas Turnpike, and IRVM practices (with less herbicide spraying) in most Kansas counties continues to be a goal of the conservation groups.

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*Ron Klataske is Executive Director of Audubon of Kansas, a statewide membership organization devoted to wildlife conservation with a special emphasis on prairie conservation.*